

# **An Interview with Ronald Staheli**



**Brigham Young University**

**School of Music, Choral Conductor**

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My name is Ronald Staheli. I did my undergraduate at Brigham Young University in piano performance, and I completed the degree in music theory as well, which existed at that time. I think I did everything but the French Diction class and the recital for a degree in voice too. Then I left BYU and went to USC in Los Angeles for my master's and my doctorate. Now at BYU I teach choir, I conduct choir, and my major assignment is with graduate students working on their master's degree—they're also involved in all of the choirs and they conduct the University Chorale, so I oversee that. I also oversee the choral area, and then work with BYU seniors.

### **Mentors from Student Years**

I've always felt very blessed because of my education at BYU. Many wonderful things happen everyday in the fine arts building because of the great efforts of so many wonderful professors. I think, of course, my main mentor was Dr. John R. Halliday, a long-time faculty member. He was a choral conductor and a wonderful theory teacher, a very demanding theory teacher. We all took a placement test at the beginning of the year; those who scored highest were put into an honors theory class, and we did four semesters of theory in three semesters. Dr. Halliday was our teacher, and I'll tell you, he was a taskmaster. A loving taskmaster, but he was a taskmaster. He taught us so much about so many things, and established in me, and I'm sure in all of the students in my class with me, a real desire to learn as much as we could about music.

I don't ever remember him saying it, although I say it often to music students, "If you're going to be a successful musician, you've got to know a lot about a lot of things in music."

You have to be a specialist, of course, but the more you know about so many other things, even tangential things, the better musician you're going to be, and the more success you're going to have—either as a performer or as a teacher or both.

He conducted the Oratorio Choir when I was a student here, and before I came he had conducted the Madrigal Singers. Before I came, he had done his doctorate dissertation working with Paul Hindemith back east. So he knew that music very well, and I think that may be one of the biggest motivations for him to delve so deeply into music theory.

Dr. Halliday was also my voice teacher, and he taught me a lot about diction. He was a wonderful man and a terrific teacher.

Then I'll always remember Lawrence Sardoni, who was an orchestra conductor. He was a terrific fellow, wonderful teacher, and a warm, wonderful person. In fact, he conducted the orchestra when I played my piano concerto with the orchestra, and I'll never forget that.

Dr. Ralph Laycock was a terrific—I mean a very strong—conductor. He knew much about all the instruments, and he expected wonderful playing from everyone all the time. I remember very well we were premiering a new piece, by a Czech composer I think it was, and it called for an orchestra, two choirs, a speaking chorus, and a jazz band; then there was a piano in the middle of all of this, and I was the pianist. I remember I got off and away from him, and oh boy, he taught me some very good things that I will always remember from that experience. Then when I came back to the faculty, he was still here for quite a few years—four, five, six, seven years, I can't remember how many. It was wonderful, because our relationship grew, and he allowed it to grow so that we became peers. He could have very well just treated me like that little green-behind-the-ears pianist who was not following him so well. But he had probably totally forgotten about that experience. I never will, but he did—at least he led me to believe he did—and he treated me well. Therefore, I was still able to learn from him, because anytime I had musical issues, I could go to him and ask. He was always very warm, and never condescending, in answering as fully as he possibly could any questions I would take to him. He was full of insights, and because of that, I took advantage of it and asked him often about issues.

Ralph Woodward was a terrific choral musician who taught me a lot about a choral tone, choral sound, and approach to choral singing. I never did sing in a choir under him, while he was conducting. I did sing when we would put choirs together for general conference or something like that; then I would sing with him, but I never did participate in the choir that he was mostly in charge of. I still think I got to watch him enough in action that I learned some very good things. He was also a great writer. He could

write about music very well; he was articulate. I have enjoyed a lot of his writings that I have collected and kept.

Merrill Bradshaw was my first piano teacher at BYU. Bless his heart, at the end of the first semester he said, “You need to study with someone else.”

Well, that wasn’t a put down, and I took it exactly the way he meant it. He wanted me to study with one of the big full-time piano gurus at BYU. So he moved me on, but I still had a wonderful experience with him.

I remember I was doing Beethoven with him in the semester, and he said to me, “You know, this movement doesn’t make much sense.”

I thought, *Well, boy, he’s listening to it in a different way than I am as a student.* It’s the first time I’d really played Beethoven—I mean, I’d played *at* Beethoven, but it was the first time I’d really studied Beethoven.

I remember then we took the rest of the lesson and picked the movement apart, but the first questions he asked me were, “Where is the climax of the movement? Where is the moment? Where is the point of arrival in this movement?”

Then we worked both directions from that until we were at the beginning. I tell you, that’s one of those moments when my whole musical life shifted—because of that incredible instruction and the fact that he knew what he was talking about and could help me see. Because I already knew the music, he could help me see on a bigger scale what was actually going on. He was a wonderful teacher.

Paul Pollei, my main piano teacher, taught me much about teaching from a positive point of view: building the student rather than criticizing the student. Even when he criticized me, it was building me up at the same time. That’s very valuable. I use that every day in my own teaching.

My piano teacher before him, who was not Merrill Bradshaw, will remain nameless for this purpose. I often felt like I could leave the lesson without even opening the door—I could just walk right underneath the crack of the door. I felt that reduced. Then when I switched to Pollei, which was such a blessing, it was a whole different story. He taught me, and I was never the same. I would walk out of there fulfilled. I couldn’t wait to get back to the practice room to work more on what we had just done. If I’m honest, I think he taught me that positivity and building the student—building the persona, building the psyche of the musician—has to happen before you can teach a lot of musicality and a lot of technique even. He taught me that. So with my shift from piano into choral music—imagine, where would I be if I hadn’t had him to point that out to me at that pivotal point in my training?

I had other good teachers, but these were the monumental teachers to me.

## **Returning to BYU**

Dr. Halliday retired, and for several years the School of Music didn’t bring on another choral musician, so it was Ralph Woodward and whomever they could enlist to do the choirs. Then I think they got to a point where they needed someone else. They had to have someone else, and that’s when Harold Goodman, who was the head of the School of Music, came to me. I was teaching at Wichita State at the time, and progressed from there.

I wasn’t sure I wanted to come back to BYU, because I was still very young. I thought, *You know, I have lots of mistakes to make that I’d rather not make at BYU.* As it turned out, it brought me here, and it’s been a very good experience.

So I’m not sure that I really replaced anybody—if a choral musician was retiring, the school just filled it with what they thought they needed most at the moment. Now it’s a little more set: if a choral musician retires, he or she will be replaced with a choral musician.

As a faculty member, 1978 was my first year. This year was my thirty-seventh year at BYU as a faculty member, and I’d been here five years as a student. So you see the majority of my adult life has been in Provo at BYU.

I think I had a lot of foolish dreams when I was immature. It didn’t take me very long, though, to decide that I had no real desire to be famous. I wanted to make a contribution and I wanted to serve the art, and I wanted to serve the Church, but I wanted to make good choral music. I wanted to stand on the shoulders of the great people who had come before me just as they stood on the shoulders of the

generation before them. I felt I owed it to them to be strong and take lots of responsible risk, and push forward in growing and learning and building our choirs at BYU to be always better.

So when opportunities have come to do things that probably would have brought me personally a lot more a sense of connection or a lot more prestige or fame, they've never had very much allure for me. I expect my students in class every day, and they can expect me in class every day. So it's very seldom that I would leave to do something else. I just don't think that's fair to them. Therefore, I don't do as much as I could; I don't get nearly as many invitations as I probably could get. But that's not important, because the issue for me is our students, our choirs here—what we do, how we build. Not that I want us to be sequestered and insulated from the world; I want us to know the best, and I want us to be doing as much as we can to match the best that's being done anywhere. In many respects, I think we've come very close to that.

The people I've worked with have been terrific—wonderful students and colleagues alike.

### **Contemporary Faculty Members and Administrators**

I've seen so many faculty members during my time at BYU, just in the vocal area. Ray Arbizu, Robert Downs (who just passed away), Brent Curtis, Clarene Downs, Ralph Woodward, Margaret Woodward—those are really giants in our history as a School of Music, or even a Department of Music.

Choral musicians: Ralph Woodward, of course; Clayne Robison, who did quite a bit of choral conducting before I came, not so much after I came. Kurt Weinzinger actually was never a colleague of mine; by the time I came back from my mission he had already left to go to Arizona. Newell Weight had left BYU by the time I came, but I always admired him, so I went out of my way to strike up a relationship with him and visited with him quite often—especially after he retired from the University of Utah and was at his home in Orem. My colleague Mack Wilberg and I would very often go visit him.

I got the opportunity to work for about seven years with Mack Wilberg. That was a wonderful experience, a treasured experience. Dr. Wilberg was a student the first year I came back to the faculty at BYU. He was just finishing his undergraduate degree. He was my first graduate assistant. He's gone on to great things.

My opportunity to work with Rosalind Hall has been heaven on earth. Few people have the chance to have a colleague who is at once their best support and best critic, where there is such an element of trust and respect that we can be absolutely open and honest with each other so that this learning process is kept going.

When I was a student here, the conductors very often held to their own a lot; they would not share concerts and they would not even be on stage with each other. Today we think nothing of that. Sometimes you go to a concert and see all three of us in the choral faculty conducting in the same concert. One will do the opening piece and another will do the closing piece; it's a shared thing. We have built a real department, and I think our openness, our collegiality, and our desire to move ahead together has served our area in the School of Music very well—and our area in the college as well. Everyone, especially the students, has benefitted from that approach.

Theory teachers: David Sargent came a couple of years before I did and retired a couple of years before I'm retiring. He was always a good friend, and in my estimation, an incredibly important teacher at BYU.

Lorin Wheelwright was dean when I came as a student, and he was still here when I came back on the faculty. Jolly good fellow—he had lots of vision, lots of ideas that I really liked. A lot of people didn't like the ideas very much. But he instituted and maintained for quite a while a Mormon Festival of the Arts. Some pretty outlandish, wonderful things happened from large productions, happened in every area of the college, and I think he made some strong statements. Of course, whenever you do something on that scale, there's always going to be great criticism, and maybe some of the critics got to him a bit. That's too bad, though, because he had real vision of an LDS point of view with the arts that I thought was valuable, and that we too often are very quiet about.

Then after him came Lael Woodbury, then Bruce Christensen. After Christensen came Newell Dayley, and from Newell Dayley it went to Stephen Jones. I think that's the right succession. I don't think I left out anyone.

Harold Goodman was a chair of the School of Music. He was also a man of vision. He had lots of critics, but great vision. He moved ahead in a major way. After him, Jim Mason—Jim Mason was also dean (I left him out). Then after Mason came Clyn Barrus, then David Randall, and then Kory Katseanes.

I've always been in the Harris Fine Arts Center, even as a student. I came here the second fall in the history of the HFAC. Back then it was wonderful, because BYU only had 15,000 students. The HFAC was very good, now it's not so. Smaller classes, practice rooms—everything was much easier then than it is now.

## **Content of Curriculum**

Most of my teaching here has been in conducting and related areas, for example, rehearsal techniques and choosing literature, that sort of thing. It's all wrapped around choral music and choral conducting. I wanted badly to come up with a better way of teaching conducting than was being taught anywhere that I knew of. So I tried the best I could to put together the ideas that I thought were basic, and I tried to arrange them in some sort of methodical approach. I used that a lot.

Then the time was just exactly right, because at the time that Dr. Wilberg left BYU and went to the Tabernacle Choir, and Rosalind Hall, who had done her master's degree with me and had studied very intensely my conducting approach, replaced him at that point. Together we decided that we would formulate the approach and that we would carefully write it out. We did, and we have made seven DVDs and a workbook, which is called *A Masterful Choral Conducting*. I think it's really, really good. It's a little bit formidable, because it's step-by-step marching through fifteen units of approach to choral music. It was meant to be done by a person on their own if they really wanted to do that, but we loved it, because we can use it in our classes. We have the students study it, and then we workshop in class—rather than teaching the principles in class, the students can see it.

We were ahead of the technology, because we wanted to be able to see score, and we wanted the students to be able to see conducting both from in back of us and in front of us at the same time. It took a couple of years for us to get it all put together, but then we shot all fifteen units with a camera coming over our shoulder and one coming straight on. So the students could not just watch us and try to do it backwards, but they could actually watch our hand and their own hand and try to do exactly what we were doing.

It's still working; we still use it in every one of our conducting classes in the choral area. It's starting to catch on, actually, in a few other places too. That is probably the major accomplishment for both of us in terms of curriculum development.

Also, I have put my approach to BYU singers and building the choir the way that I think it needs to be built to do what it needs to do—to get our message out to the world. That's taken a lot of time. That's a lot of reading, a lot of studying, a lot of thinking, a lot of experimenting.

The biggest experimentation probably comes in the area of building the sense of commitment, the sense of responsibility, in the students—all the while helping them to see it as an opportunity, not as a millstone. I suppose if I were to teach another ten years, I would probably keep on doing that.

I decided last summer, for my last year I was going to prepare a real document in which I tried to deduce as clearly as I could the primary goal of our choir BYU Singers, and then add a list of supporting goals, and then an explanation of all those. It turned out to be very long, but I think that most everything I had learned and felt was right is included in that document. Now that I'm retiring, I'm going to use that as a bit of a skeleton for a book I'd like to write.

## **Changes in the College**

I think I was the great recipient of Ralph Woodward, who put the BYU A Capella Choir on the international map. Then because of a series of experiences that were also good fortune, or divine guidance,

wonderful things happened that opened doors for BYU Singers to go all over the world. I've watched that happen. Ralph Woodward certainly deserves the credit for opening that door and establishing that opportunity, and we have continued that. We've gone to places he went, but then we've been pioneers in West Africa, South Africa, Egypt, and Jordan—lots of places that choirs don't often go. Thank heaven we're getting our chance to go to China this spring.

Departmental organizational structure keeps changing too. I've been here to see it make the rotation about three times now—what's old is always new again. It's always experimenting; I'm not sure we ever perfect it very much.

The physical facilities haven't changed much; I wish they had. A recital hall is not much of a choral room. We finally got carpets on the floors about ten years ago or so, which was a wonderful help. Can you imagine the fine arts building with tile floors? Halls, rooms—everything was tile floor. The noise was incredible. That was a big deal, the day we got carpets. They absorb a lot of the sound.

We're a bit sequestered here in the tops of the mountains, away from the rest of the world, but we have still tried as a choral faculty to stay current with what's happening chorally in the world—through recordings, and visiting conferences and conventions. I think we have brought a lot of the best of what the world has to offer to BYU.

And it's not that that was a new thing, because of Ralph Woodward, who started it in his own way; Dr. Halliday was very good at bringing big works, especially of the masters, here, but works that weren't performed so often, and you know, you'll hear the Verde *Requiem* a Brahms *Requiem*, Haydn, Mozart—you'll hear all of that, all over; that is, it should be done all over. But then there were things we do here that are not done everywhere. I often say, the *pièce de jour* is done everywhere—the “piece of the day”; it's done and then it's forgotten about, it's thrown away. We've tried to stay out of that. If we have done a popular piece, we've usually been on the vanguard and done it before it became the piece of the day. I'm proud that we've been vigilant of that.

Eric Whitaker's music is going all over the world now, and I'm happy to say that BYU singers started that whole thing with the production of that initial CD. I'm not kidding when I say that when we visited South Africa, I was autographing copies of the CD that had sold in South Africa.

So it hasn't been so much advancing as just staying current. We have stayed current, and I think we are current right now in our repertoire. We know what's happening, but we still stay very tight to our classical roots.

The biggest change for us was with computer notation programs. That has revolutionized my own work and Sister Hall's work. Our predecessors didn't have that. It's made things much easier to accomplish, in terms of arrangements that we needed or revisions that we've had to do. It's been a godsend to us. I use it every day.

## **Research and Creative Work**

Most of my research and creative work is program building. Of course, there's always the ongoing question of how choral tone is achieved, but my major emphasis has been program development.

I've also found that a lot of my creative work has been preparing older scores for modern performance. For example, if you look at the programs of BYU singers from this year, we're doing a Monteverdi madrigal, we're doing a Palestrina madrigal, we're doing a Haydn part song, and we're doing a Mozart—actually it's a chorus from an opera, but it's very much in the 19th century German part-song tradition. All four of those needed to have practical performing additions made on them. There were some in existence, but they did not suit our purposes as BYU singers. For whatever reasons—very often, especially in the case of Monteverdi where the ranges are so strange, it's because they had men singing the alto part, so the alto part would be very low, and very often it was in the wrong key. So the keys have to be lifted, and then you have to rearrange lines so that the parts are covered, but not necessarily the way Monteverdi originally wrote it. It requires quite a bit of study, quite a bit of thought, and experiments to make it work.

So for about the last ten years or so, I've done our own editions of music from the renaissance, even into the baroque classical. Even this year, I made our own edition of a Mendelsohn score, simply because

I couldn't find one that I thought was right. Taking music and the German text together, the marking and the editions didn't work, and so I made our own editions of that. That has been very fulfilling. Of course, it's been wonderful for me, because I'm not just the theorist who sits in the room and writes them out; I get to take them to rehearsal to see how they sound, and if it's not right, I have to do it again. I can keep working at it. I've learned a lot in that process, the chance to workshop it every day and then go back to my computer and fix whatever needs to be done. I've used several reams of paper doing that—yes I have.

I've done a lot of arrangements. We don't do so much of this anymore—I'm not sure why unless I just got tired of it—but we did a lot of musical theatre kinds of things, and sometimes even popular songs, but I could never find an arrangement that I thought was worthy of BYU Singers. It never had enough substance. It was a melody and funny little accompaniment—something you learned, you sang, and you threw it away. If we're going to learn it, we'll probably sing it on tour. Therefore it had to have a little more essence and substance. So a lot of my creative work has been musical theatre arrangements, folk song arrangements, spiritual arrangements, and folk hymns—very few original compositions. That's not my gift. At least it's not my gift when I don't have large blocks of time to work in. Once I've got my skeleton, I can do my arrangements for fifteen minutes here and forty-five minutes there, but I can't compose that way, and I don't know anybody who can, actually. I've never been given that time, so I never have, nor have I actually felt a need to do that. It'll be interesting to see if I feel that after I retire.

### **Direction for BYU**

I saw from the outset the need for teachers to take risks in classes. To take risks, in my case with BYU Singers, to program in a risky way—not an irresponsibly risky way, but still it's a risky way. To do some of the pieces that we've done, and I think done reasonably well, it took enormous risk, and great care and enormous organization of follow-up, planning, and careful strategizing. Every dream you have involves enormous risk taking. You can sit very nicely with your knees covered with your skirt, but in my opinion, you're not going to accomplish much that way. If you're going to be on the vanguard, and if you're going to do great things, which has been prophesied we're going to do someday, then I think that one has to take risks. One has to move forward.

We have a great role to fill in the world, and that's becoming so much clearer to me the older I get, because where there were so many fabulous choirs all over this country, they are disappearing. There are still those centers of good choral music making, and luckily, BYU is still one of them. I think our goal should be to grow, because I see everything else diminishing, and we need to stay strong to do what we need to do. We're going to be looked to more and more and more for how this can be accomplished in a society that is crumbling all around us. I think that's going to involve a lot of risk.

A dear colleague said to me once, "You know, if you want to avoid criticism, say nothing, do nothing, be nothing." I think that's too often our approach. And yet, I think we have to stand up and be counted, all the while taking responsibility for what we do.

I have great hope, though; I feel a new day dawning. I have great hope, a real hope.

We should be focusing our energies—learning, growing, absorbing the past, and pushing forward with that knowledge. Standing on the shoulders of everybody that's gone before. Making better music than has ever been made at BYU. Creating better art. Doing better drama. Making better designs than ever before. Potential at BYU is greater than anywhere else. That's why I've stayed here, even though I've had a few financially attractive offers to leave. I've always thought, *I can't do that, because here is where it's going to happen*. I've had a jolly good time here. I've learned so much.

### **Final Reflections**

I retire August 31, 2015. The department has been interviewing the candidates for my position, and as I've watched—I haven't been involved directly, which is very good—but as I've watched from afar and listened to lectures and things, I see the people and I think, *How was I when I was that same age and that far along in my professional life? Could I have done what they're doing now?*

If somebody wants to say, “Well, they’re certainly not a replacement for you,” I say, “Oh, maybe they are. Maybe they’re going to be much greater, because maybe they’re much further along now than I was at that time.”

It’s been a great learning experience. I think a musician that quits getting better quits being good, and I think it’s the same with a teacher.

You stop getting better the moment you say, “Oh, I know it all; I’ve learned it all, I don’t need to rethink, I don’t need to plan anymore, I know how this all goes. I don’t need to be prepared.”

I remember one of my teachers in graduate school in one of my musicology classes—an older woman. She was very knowledgeable, but she couldn’t hear a thing. We had to holler in her ear to get even the least bit of communication. She would prepare her lecture on crazy loose papers, crazy papers. Then as she would leave the class, she would throw them in the garbage. No wonder she was such a great teacher. She prepared for every class period. It was a lesson to me about learning and preparing and rethinking and never just going by last semester’s syllabus. I’m sure she used the basis of her knowledge to write the plans, and I do that too, but it always needs to be different learning.

We’re all learning together. If you become a teacher, by your students you’ll be taught. It’s really true, and such an important part of the profession.